

Establishing a pilot program to repay student loans for certain correctional officers

HB 2103 by Kolkhorst (Ogden)

DIGEST: HB 2103 would have established a pilot program, administered by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), to provide assistance in the repayment of student loans for certain correctional officers who graduated with a baccalaureate degree from Sam Houston State University. The repayment assistance could have been used to repay any part of a student loan for tuition and fees for junior-level or senior-level courses taken in the baccalaureate degree program. In order to be eligible, correctional officers enrolled at the university would have to have been employed full-time as a correctional officer, been a Texas resident, needed financial aid, maintained good academic standing, and agreed to work at least one year as a full-time officer no later than the second anniversary of their graduation.

The loan repayment could not have exceeded the cost of tuition and fees required to enroll in 30 semester credit hours of junior-level or senior-level coursework. The loans would have been paid from a trust fund established outside the treasury but held in trust by the comptroller. Interest and income from the assets of the fund would have been used for the repayment of loans. Gifts, grants, and state appropriations could have been used to fund the program. The THECB could have used up to 2.5 percent of the money to cover the costs of administering the program. The pilot program would have expired after the 2013-14 academic year.

GOVERNOR'S REASON FOR VETO:

“House Bill No. 2103 would provide student loan repayment assistance for correctional officers who take junior- and senior-level courses at Sam Houston State University and fulfill certain other requirements.

“Although correctional officers are needed across the state, this bill would limit them to attending only one specified university to achieve the intended benefit.

“Furthermore, the state currently funds 19 financial aid programs; five of these are major financial aid programs and the other 14 target small groups of students. If the legislature funds the five major programs adequately, as I set forth in my 2008-09 budget proposal, then we should not need other programs. It is more cost effective for the Higher Education Coordinating Board and the institutions to administer a few large programs rather than many small programs.”

RESPONSE: Rep. Lois Kolkhorst, the bill’s author, said: “As a longtime advocate for employees of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), and someone who represents thousands of prison employee families, I am disappointed in the veto of HB 2103. Modeled after the popular federal ‘G.I.’ bill, this legislation would have been a strong recruitment tool that would have decreased the shortage of correctional officers needed in our state. By offering tuition reimbursement in exchange for a commitment to work in the state prison system for a set number of years, the bill was widely supported by both labor and management ranks within TDCJ, and would have

produced a personal benefit to the individuals enrolled, and a positive impact to the corrections institution. Perhaps most importantly, the taxpayer would have benefited due to the lower attrition rate for correctional officers.

“Contrary to the governor’s reason for the veto, in which he voiced concerns that this bill would limit [correctional officers] to attending only one specified university, the fact remains that this bill clearly was intended to be a ‘pilot project’ and hence logically would need to be offered at one university first, before being expanded statewide at a later date. The veto not only ignored this obvious fact, but also remained deaf to the bipartisan support that the bill received in the House Corrections Committee and the Senate Higher Education Committee as well as the unanimous approval of both the entire House and Senate.

“By rejecting this powerful new recruitment and retention tool, the governor’s veto further accelerates and increases the problems experienced with attracting individuals to work within the state’s correctional units. More than a financial aid program, this bill would have been a benefit to taxpayers, a badly needed boost to the morale within our prison units, and an important tool for individuals to better themselves through higher education.”

Sen. Steve Ogden, the Senate sponsor, had no comment on the veto.

NOTES:

HB 2103 passed the House on the Local, Consent, and Resolutions Calendar and was not analyzed in a *Daily Floor Report*.